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In

Porto Rican
Homes



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IN PORTO RICAN HOMES

WE have been invited today to call upon the lady who has taught Spanish to several in our Mission. She is a very staunch Catholic, having been educated in a convent in Spain where her father, who was a prominent doctor in Bayamon, sent her. You see before the United States took possession of Porto Rico, there were but a few very inferior schools and only fifteen percent of the people could even read and write. Dona Maria and her sister were among the fortunate few whose parents were able to send them away to school.

Her home stands right by the narrow sidewalk, so we step from the sidewalk into the door. The windows that open directly upon the sidewalk, have wooden railings just about high enough to conveniently support the elbows of the members of the family, who like to stand here and look out into the street in the evening. Dona Maria spends very little of her time in this way, but in almost any of the homes of her neighbors we see pretty señoritas daintily and sometimes elegantly clad, leaning upon the railings of the windows or upon the railing of a very narrow balcony in front of the house. Often her mother, clad in a loose wrapper which is very much tucked and lace betrimmed and very clean, stands by her side. The passer-by observes many Romeo and Juliet

scenes, and as we sit here in Dona Maria's *sala* or parlor, we are able to see such a scene across the street.

Now let us look about us. Our attention is attracted to the tile floor, probably many years old. It looks somewhat like grandmother's four patch quilts, for it is laid in six-inch tiles, first a figured one, then a white one, all over the floor. It gives the effect of a carpet and is more sanitary. The walls are tinted to simulate marble to a height of about three feet from the floor; above, there is a plain color, and next to the ceiling some stenciled design.

In the center of the parlor is the inevitable center table with a multitude of little bisque figures of dolls, dogs, angels, dainty slippers, and what not. The number of these things depends upon the pocketbook of the family. It is desirable that the table be completely filled with them. Often in the very center of the table stands a vase of very gaudy tissue paper flowers. The real ones are so common, where one can step out and gather roses at Christmas time, that the tissue paper ones are chosen to decorate the parlor. Around the center table chairs are carefully and geometrically placed. A large rocker faces each corner of the table, and sometimes a straight backed chair faces each side of the table, while at other times all of the straight backed chairs stand in a row against the wall. Pictures go in pairs. If on one side of a room a gilt framed picture hangs, on the opposite side, a similar picture of the same size and same kind

of frame must hang. Sometimes the two pictures are exactly alike, carrying to perfection the idea of balance.

We step into a bed room, and notice at once the hangings of old fashioned, big designed lace curtains, such as we used a few years ago for our windows. They use them for bed hangings. The bed is made with a framework, or kind of roof, four or five feet above it, and these curtains are thrown over the frame work. Under the curtains is a net which is drawn carefully about the bed at night to keep away the mosquitoes. A bright chromo of Mary, with her heart, not on her sleeve but in plain sight on her breast, hangs at the head of the bed.

Let us pass through the dining room. The red cloth on the table attracts our attention, as does the easter in the center with its vinegar cruet, salt and pepper shakers, and oil bottle. Do not forget the oil.

The meals in this home are served in courses, with special emphasis upon the meats and substantial, and little attention is paid to deserts. A clean plate is brought with each new food to be eaten. Roast beef and mashed potatoes may begin the meal, then fried eggs and French-fried potatoes, then sweet potatoes, served with cod fish, oil and vinegar, then rice and beans, and for dessert, shredded cocoanut, stewed with plenty of sugar, or guava jelly or some kind of preserves, and coffee. Bread is bought from the baker, and never made in the home. The loaves are long and rather slender,

and it is served in chunks rather than in slices.

Bread and coffee is a typical morning meal, and all who have never been in foreign lands to learn the customs, dip their chunks of bread into their cups of coffee. As soon as a child is large enough to have any food he has bread and coffee.

Now let us step into the patio or inner court. Sometimes the houses are built clear around the patio, but Dona Maria's home is on but two sides of it, while on the other two sides stands a very substantial concrete wall as high as a man's head. On top of the wall are old broken bottles, dozens of them, with the jagged edges sticking upwards. They were put there when the cement was soft and are a part of the wall.

- The patio has a solid cement floor, except in patches, some round and some square, where flowers are planted. Along the walls are beautiful flowering vines. From the patio let us step into the kitchen, one of the very last rooms of the house, well removed from the front. Lest your first glimpse disappoint you too greatly, let me say that the fuel used is charcoal, the stoves, charcoal braziers or cement "camping stoves", built right into the kitchen. Into square holes in the top of these stoves are fitted iron grates where the charcoal fire is made. Charcoal is not a bad kind of dirt, yet it is black, and little pieces of it do fall upon the floor to be stepped upon, and the dust of it clings to the cook's clothes and hands, and the open fire discolors walls and

ceilings in a short time. In some homes, kerosene stoves are replacing the charcoal. But we must be going, and I must not forget to interpret for you that which Dona Maria's parents are saying to us as we leave. "Must you go so soon? Come again. Our house is yours—we are at your orders."

Now let us go out to Hato Tejas to visit Dona Eustaquia. Dear old Dona Eustaquia is one of our first members here. She lives just across the street from the Mission building. Her's is one of those hospitable homes where her friends feel welcome. Anyone who has formerly lived in Hato Tejas, wishing to return for a visit, is always safe in establishing headquarters at Dona Eustaquia's. They are all made welcome.

Eustaquia's is a frame house with board floors and unsealed board walls. It is a six-roomed house, fairly comfortable, though not as pretentious as the city home we have visited. Eustaquia herself is the chief ornament. Her's is a splendid Christian character. She came out and made a stand for Christ when neighbors and relatives opposed, and taunted and avoided her. She lived a consistent Christian life in spite of them, and saw them coming back to her, one by one, as they needed her help in sickness or trouble. She has stood by the church when we had a preacher and when we didn't. She has taught the Beginner's Class for several years, bringing with her her own little daughters, her nieces and nephews, and her neighbors' children, all of whom are very fond of her.

Next we must visit Lorenza up in Dajaos. Lorenza is an orphanage girl, a demure, modest, sweet dispositioned little thing, weighing not more than ninety pounds, I am sure. Lorenza is not strong. She fights tuberculosis all of the time, and were it not for her naturally cheerful disposition and her out-of-door work she might be an invalid instead of a Christian worker. She is what we might call a deaconess in the Dajaos church, which, you remember, is located in the coffee district, three miles from a road. She visits the members, reads to the blind, the shut-ins, the aged and any who have not had the privilege of learning to read. She explains the duties of the Christian life. She teaches girls and women to crochet, hem-stitch or darn hose. She is a general favorite in Dajaos, and the members support her, paying her a little monthly wage. They built a little home for her. It is located about half way down the hill from the Dajaos church. She is near the church but has a steep climb to reach it. The house is new looking, made with undressed lumber, palm sheaths and thatch. Sheaths of palm form the doors inside the house, too. Palm sheath is somewhat like birch bark, only it is thicker and very stiff. The thatched roof is far more comfortable under that tropical sun than a tin roof.

Lorenza's mother keeps house for her, and raises chickens and turkeys and a little garden. The last time I was in Dajaos, Lorenza's mother, Dona Marcolina, made some delicious *arro con pollo* (chicken and rice), and sent us a generous helping.

Let us go with Lorenza to visit some of the members. Here is a tiny house set up on stilts so that a heavy dashing rain may have plenty of chance to run off, and not form a damp puddle under the house. The front steps resemble a chicken roost, but in we go. We sit upon a home-made bench, a box and in a home-made hammock. We look about us. The floor is of poles—a sort of corrugated floor. They are not worried as to how they can use a rocking chair on such a floor, for they have no such piece of furniture. The walls are almost covered with lesson picture cards, Sunday school papers and big pictures from the big lesson chart at Sunday school. Each quarter, as a lesson is reviewed, the picture is torn off and given to someone in the school, so at least twelve families receive a big picture each quarter.

At one side of the room are several canvas cots folded up. They will be put down in this room, tonight, and the father, mother and four children will occupy them and the little baby will swing in the hammock. There is but one other room in the house and that is the kitchen. It is entirely separate from this room, and one takes several steps on a little board bridge in going from this room to the kitchen. There is a little roof over the bridge, too, so one does not get too wet going to the kitchen on rainy days, unless the wind is blowing.

As soon as we enter the kitchen we see why it is isolated. Smoke! Charcoal is a luxury not to be afforded here. Brush, sticks and pieces of wood are the fuel, and since the

kettle rests on three stones on top of a cement stove, and there is no chimney, the kitchen becomes pretty smoky. It is a well ventilated room, however, sometimes having only three sides, so the smoke escapes. That big iron kettle on the stove is used to cook beans, or rice, or meat, or to toast coffee. These half gourds about a foot and a half long and a foot wide are used for dish pans. The smaller ones for plates. Long strips from the big gourds make cooking spoons, and strips from smaller gourds make teaspoons. Gourds wound with *bejuca*, a kind of grapevine, are hung up by the vine handle, and milk or coffee or sugar kept in them. Gourds are used to carry water. Coconut shells make fine coffee cups, and the longer they are used the more polished and shiny they become. Just outside the door is the mortar and pestle where the coffee is ground, and not many rods away the coffee grove itself. Here is a banana patch where several kinds of bananas grow. The big coarse ones, good only when cooked, are called platanos. The little tart ones, apple bananas. Here, also, is a little patch of corn, some beans, and a sweet potato patch. The needs of the home are simple, the people almost primitive, but the hearts are sincere and true. As we mount our horses and ride down the narrow path toward the road, we hear them say, "*Adios, vaya con Dios*" (Good-bye, God be with you).

NORA SILER.

NOTE—People are often called by their first names, even when they are old and gray. Don

is the title of respect used before a man's first name, and Dona before a woman's first name. This custom is not unlike our "Miss Abby" or "Miss Fanny" used so often in the south.



